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AN ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF
HIS MAJESTY'S ARMED REVENUE SLOOP "LIBERTY" AT NEWPORT, R.I.

JULY 1769.

(MANUSCRIPT)

REDWOOD LIBRARY AND ATHENAEUM



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On July 31, 1783, a writer whose name is unknown to us addressed the letter bound in these covers to Messrs. Edes and Giff, with the request that it be inserted in the next issue of their Boston Gazette. As this contribution was not accepted for publication, the MS. version is probably unique.

The letter, dated at Newport, contains a circumstantial narrative of the destruction of the Liberty by the towns-people. About the middle of July, Captain Reid of the armed ship Liberty put into Newport, having in custody a brigantine, Packwood master, and a New London ship. Packwood, while attempting to remove his possessions from the Liberty, became involved in an altercation with the British boatswain and was subsequently fired on by his orders. This over-act, coupled with Reid's habit of "intemperately" drinking about and passing into every creek and corner in our river, so increased the animosity that, after frightening the officious captain half out of his wits, they set upon his ship and "went to work deliberately and scuttled, dismantled, stripped and dismantled her." The letter closes with an expression of trust that Captain Reid had learned better manners so that he would not further incur "the universal resentment of an abused, oppressed people.... and no longer disgrace and degrade himself by continuing to be an infamous delinquent fool, rascal, and informer to a board whose honesty, integrity, and arbitrary behavior have rendered them ridiculous and contemptible." It would be difficult to find a contemporary document which more glaringly reflects the pre-revolutionary spirit aroused by British seizures. Perhaps Messrs. Edes and Giff felt that discretion was their part, even though it meant betraying their subscribers of a first-hand report of such an important piece of news as the destruction of the Liberty.

"This was the first overt act of violence offered to the British authorities in America." (Arnold's History of Rhode Island, v.2, p.237-8)

Newport July 21st 1769

Meigs & Co. & Gill

Please to insert the following in
your next Gazette and you'll oblige
D^{rs}

A few Days ago an armed Sloop ^{in the Service of the Revenue}~~unofficially~~ named Liberty,
appointed by the Comm^r of N. York Customs, and Commanded by
the famous or rather infamous ~~Capt~~ William Reid, arrived in
this Port from a Cruise, and brought in with her a Brigantine
from the W. Indies bound to New York, and commanded by
Packwood, and a Sloop (~~whose~~ Voyage & Capt's Name
~~were both unknown to the Writer of this Advertisement~~) both
belonging to and taken off New London, & ~~both were~~
~~Quinn the vigilante kept both one of the Prizes and both~~
~~& Pratt & sent them to Boston or Calif.~~

Last Wednesday in the Afternoon Capt. Packwood went on Board his Brig. in Order to take a Shore his Wearing Apparell and finding his ~~things~~ turned out off the Cabin he manifest-
ed his Surprise at it to the Officers ^{of the Cutter} who had the Charge of the Brig. and asked him what it meant - The Officer dammed him, told him that he had a Right to do what he pleased on Board that vessel. that he (Packwood) should not carry any thing out off there, and treated him with such abusive, scandalous, threatening Language, that Capt. Packwood unable any longer to bear ~~any longer to bear~~ such intolerable ^{Abuse}, drew his Sword, which he had just taken out off the Cabin, and told him that if he persisted in his insolent Behaviour he would infallibly run him through - The puissant Boatswain now thought it best to haul in his Horns, and permit Capt. Packwood to take his Goods into his Boat, but he had no sooner left the Brigantines Side before the ^{said} Boatswain ~~resuming~~ ^{resuming} his courage, trailed the Cutter, & ordered her to fire upon that damned rascal in the Boat - ~~Matches were immediately applied to the~~ ^{upon which} ~~Survival Gun~~ ^{gun} ~~both of which flashed~~ - The Armed

~~Several Persons were at the Long to the Long Wharf~~
near which the Cutter & Brig were both anchored —

Several Persons were at the Head of the Wharff when this Action was perpetrated - An Account of it was soon communicated, and a Number of People collected on the Wharff - This astonishing Instance of Outrage & Barbarity, - The full View of Two Vessels which Capt. Reid had just brought into Port, and was practising every ~~diabolical~~ Art in his Power to have sacrificed to a Set of hungry Officers, and his own Rapacity; - The Idea of his infamously primping about & peeping into every Creek & Corner in our River where his Varge could be introduced, and ^{dragging} ~~stopping~~ every Boat that passed; and his manifest determined Resolutions to distress & harass Trade to the utmost of his Power; ~~and the Severity, Partiality, Malice & Injustice of the Collector of the Customs occasioned only by the Merchants refusing to pay him higher than what by Law was allowed~~ - All these Ideas at once took Possession of the Minds of the People, and inflamed their Repentment - They soon determined that Satisfaction should be ^{made} ~~given~~ to Capt. Packwood, that a temporary Check at least should be given to the mercenary, piratical Conduct of Capt. Reid, ~~and that the same of the most~~ ^{that} ~~notorious~~ ^{of} ~~fact~~ ^{of} ~~should be pursued~~ - While they were at this Instant, in the Dusk of the Evening, Capt. Reid & his Wife came down the Wharff in Order to go aboard his Sloop - The crowd surrounded them, conducted them into an House ~~at the Wharff~~ and demanded Satisfaction of him for the insolent Abuse, just offered to Capt. Packwood; reproached ^{him} with offering two of Capt. Packwood's

Sailors a large Sum, to swear that he had broke Bullets
before he was taken, and with many others of his low
dirty Actions — Terrified at his Situation and conscious of
his Guilt, as other Majorents had done, ~~he~~ fell upon his
knees and ~~was~~ began to shake solemn Protestations of his
Innocence ~~saying that he~~ ~~to appear~~ ~~the People~~; but he
was interrupted, told to stand up upon his Feet. That Nobody
intended an Injury to his Person that nothing was required
of him but this, that he would ~~order~~ deliver up the Person
who fired at Capt. Packwood — This he readily consented to,
and accordingly ordered his Men on Shore — As soon as they
were landed — Part of the People ~~took~~ hauled up the ~~bridge~~,
~~carried them off & burned them~~ ~~here~~ ~~on the~~ ~~place~~ ~~where~~ ~~a~~ ~~Ship~~ ~~of~~ ~~War~~ ~~Barry~~
~~was~~ ~~burned~~ ~~a~~ ~~few~~ ~~years~~ ~~ago~~ ~~and~~ ~~there~~ ~~burned~~ ~~there~~ ~~and~~
Part of them went on Board Liberty Sloop, cut her cable
and let her go ashore, when they went to work deliberately
and scuttled, dismasted, stripped & dismantled her — While
these things were transacting the Sloop which was brought
in by the cutters weighed Anchor, and went out off the ^{was}
Harbour — The Stillness of the People during this Affair,
very remarkable, and it is extremely happy that no Injury
was offered to the Person of Capt. Reid, nor Indecency to
his Wife, nor Violence to any of his Crew — It is hoped
that Capt. Reid now he is ~~unshipped~~ ^{unshipped} will think seriously of
the Danger to which his opprobrious conduct hath exposed
him, weigh well the consequences ~~which may attend~~ of
incurring the universal Repentment of an abused oppressed
People and determine for the future to enter upon ^{some}
Employment worthy of a Man, and no longer ^{and} ~~disgrace~~ ^{degrade}
himself by continuing to be an infamous detested Prob,
Punch & Informer to a Board whose haughty, imperious
arbitrary Behaviours have rendered them ridiculous and
contemptible —

P.S. Capt. Packwood's Brig^t was cleared
out at the Custom House the next
Day & sailed for New York

An Account of
the Destruction of
the City of
July 1769

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1871

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